



**‘Day students’ in Higher Education: widening access
students and successful transitions to university life**

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‘Day students’ in Higher Education: widening access students and successful transitions to university life

Abstract

This article explores the experiences of widening access students at two prestigious Universities in Scotland. It is based on interview data collected from a small sample of young and mature students who had all attended a widening access course prior to coming to University. The analysis centres on the students’ construction of themselves as ‘day students’, who live at home and combine studying with commitments to family or to paid employment. While they see being day students as a pragmatic response to their financial and material circumstances, it is argued that this disadvantages the students within the University system both through their limited ability to participate in the wider social aspects of student life and through their exclusion from networks through which important information circulates.

Biographical notes

Hazel Christie is Lecturer in Social Geography at the University of Edinburgh. Her research interests lie broadly in the area of the student experience and she has conducted research (supported by the ESRC and CRSIS) on: the financial circumstances of students, including extent of any familial financial support; social class differences in attitudes to and experiences of higher education; and explanations for why students leave university early. More recently she has been researching the experiences of widening access students at elite universities in Scotland.

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Introduction

Policy debates about the future of Higher Education in the UK are currently pre-occupied with widening participation and with how best the system can be expanded to support a more diverse student population. A university education is seen as countering social exclusion and poverty, whilst simultaneously contributing to national economic prosperity by broadening the base of skills needed to support a 'knowledge economy'. Despite the expansion in student numbers in the last 20 years or so, and the efforts to 'ensure that all those with the potential to benefit from Higher Education have the opportunity to do so whatever their background and whenever they need it' (HEFCE 2004a: 4), levels of participation remain low amongst disadvantaged social groups. The presumption that a greatly expanded Higher Education sector automatically enhances social justice is challenged by the persistent social class gradient in participation. For example, across the UK, currently 48% of young people from families with professional and non-manual workers (social classes I, II and IIIN) go to University compared to 18% from families with skilled, partly skilled or unskilled workers (HEFCE 2004b).

The continued imbalance in the social composition of Higher Education participants raises difficult questions about the contradictory nature of the recent expansion in Higher Education. Although evidence is mixed, the introduction of student loans and top-up fees across the UK is likely to deter at least some working class students from coming into higher education (Callender and Wilkinson 2003). The tension between increasing student numbers whilst simultaneously expecting students and their families to bear more of the costs of HE is complicated by the fact that higher education policy in the UK is devolved to its four constituent countries of England, N. Ireland, Scotland and Wales. In Scotland – the focus of this paper – the devolved administration abolished up-front tuition fees in 2001 and introduced small bursaries for Scottish students from the most impoverished backgrounds, but their major source of income for living expenses remains the student loan (see Christie *et al* 2001; Paterson *et al* 2000). England followed suit in October 2004 when small grants were also made available to students from low-income families, and from 2006 students will be charged variable tuition fees. Wales and N. Ireland are reviewing their policies but currently are closest to the English model. The student loan then is intended to offer all suitably qualified young people the opportunity to attend university, whatever the financial circumstances of their families. The 'failure' of working class students to attend, and the limited success of widening participation initiatives, are thus either seen as a problem of individuals who have not 'progressed' to a middle class acceptance of student debt, or of institutions that fail to allow (fair) access for such students.

Policy debates about widening access are not just about admitting students to university; they are also centrally concerned with how best to support students to the successful conclusion of their degree (see for example DfES 2003a, HEFCE 2003, Scottish Executive 2003, QAAHE 2004). This agenda is driven by progression rates, which were as low as 81% in 1995/96, and again the presumption that higher education automatically enhances social justice is challenged by class differences in the rates at which students withdraw from University. Statistics compiled by HEFCE for 1997-98 show that 5% of students from social class I withdraw before the end of the first year while this figure rises to 9% among students from social classes IV and V. Although evidence about the relationship between social class and retention is complex (see Christie *et al* 2004: 618-9), Quinn (2004) argues that the expectation of drop out is becoming entwined with working class identities and with attendance at the new universities. Working class students are thus presented as 'problematic' because they are more likely to drop out. Non-traditional students are positioned as somehow deficient, or as 'second class students', whether through a lack of understanding of the university system, lack of preparedness for academic study, or unwillingness to adopt a student identity (Thomas 2002: 246).

An underlying assumption in these debates about widening access then is that non-traditional students are the lesser – and problematic – partners in the mass higher education system, and that they must change to 'fit in' to University life. Indeed Woodrow (2000) argues that the term widening participation is in itself problematic because it conveys no indication of the 'institutional change requirements' which should be an explicit element of higher education policy. But in emphasising the need to make individuals 'fit in', a middle class way of being a student is privileged, where leaving home to attend university is the norm, debt is an accepted part of life, and where new friendships and networks built within University are crucial to success. A growing body of literature demonstrates how the normalisation of the middle class route to higher education is continually reinforced through discourses of education which place non-traditional students as the 'other' (Archer *et al* 2001, 2003, Read *et al* 2003, Bamber and Tett 1999). Thus, to take just two examples, it is argued that Open Days construct the concept of the 'normal' student as young, heterosexual and living on site (Magolda 2000); while the promotion of the 'independent learner' privileges the status quo by making students adjust to existing undergraduate provision rather than engaging in a rethink of approaches better suited to a more diverse population (MacDonald and Stratta 2001, Rhodes and Nevill 2004).

The reality of the 'new students' (Leathwood and O'Connell 2003, see also Bowl 2003) is strikingly different from these middle class norms. As young people from more diverse backgrounds participate in higher education, transitions to and experiences of student life are becoming more varied (Furlong and Forsyth 2000). Inevitably these classed experiences of university are also differentiated by 'race' and by gender (DfES 2003b, Jackson 2003, Reay *et al* 2001, Tett 2000). The reduction in state financial support for students means that many young people from lower socio-economic groups, those with little or no family tradition of higher education, and mature students, may choose to live at home and study locally. Such trends are superimposed on distinctive regional cultures and pathways to higher education. In Scotland, more broadly, there is a greater tendency for students to live at home and attend a local university (Raffe 2003; see also Pugsley 1998 on Wales). Students who live at home may continue with the same work patterns, family responsibilities, leisure activities and social networks that they enjoyed while at school or college. As such they are rejecting 'normative ideals' about studenthood — the implicit understanding that only there is only one 'authentic' way of being a student — and forging new and distinctive pathways through higher education.

In this paper the aim is to unpack what factors help or hinder non-traditional students in making a successful transition to university life. Rather less attention has been paid to academic success than to failure (see also Boyle *et al* 2002) so the emphasis here is on the students who have succeeded, both in terms of getting a place at university and of making it through to at least the end of the second year of study. The paper argues that ideas about 'fitting in' rest on the notion that the 'middle class' way of being a student is privileged/privileging. Instead it is possible to suggest that 'different' university experiences can be equally valid in supporting students to the completion of a degree. The primary concern in this paper is with the experiences of young and mature students who have come into University from widening access programmes, the majority of whom are first generation educated and from working class backgrounds. It is structured as follows. The section which follows discusses the context and method of the study. The paper then turns to a detailed analysis of the empirical findings, introducing the concept of the 'day student' — a term used by the participating students to describe their circumstances. Thereafter, the existence of three distinctive types of 'day students' is considered — 'absorbed students', 'pragmatists' and 'separate worlds students'. These groups reflect important differences in the ways in which students juggle study, home, work and family lives, and how these are underpinned by their perceptions of, and their orientation to, student life. Before drawing to a conclusion, the paper reflects on the extent to which the experiences of these widening access students differ from normative ideas about student life.

Context and Method

The research on which this paper is based was undertaken in Scotland. Scotland is an interesting place in which to study the experiences of non-traditional students, not least as a counter to the metropolitan dominance of much of the work on the relationship between class and Higher Education (see for example Archer *et al* 2003). Participation rates have long been higher in Scotland, and there exists a long and distinguished literature linking this with the distinctiveness of the Scottish education system (Bryce and Humes 2003, Paterson 2003, Raffe 2004). Although the government's target of 50% participation rates amongst young adults across the UK has been reached in Scotland, the predictable social class gradients persist in both access to university and choice of institution. In 2001-02 for example 31% of school leavers from publicly funded schools went directly into higher education compared to 83% of school leavers from privately funded schools (SHEFCE 2004). Similarly, the Scottish School Leavers' Survey indicates that aspirations to go to university are class mediated: 83% of school leavers with parents from the higher managerial or professional classes expected to go to university compared to 41% whose parents were from routine or semi-routine occupations (Scottish Executive 2000). Class inequalities are further reproduced through the matching of students to institutions. Using the Carstairs Deprivation Category, Raab and Storkey (2003) show that the ancient¹ universities admit 4.5 students from the most advantaged postcodes (top 20%) for every one student from the most deprived neighbourhoods (bottom 20%).

Further education is the main vehicle in Scotland for drawing non-traditional learners into advanced and degree studies (Gallacher *et al* 2000). Although a series of smaller scale Access programmes also exist, these account for only 2% of the students entering higher education. The Scottish Executive (2003) does not plan to further extend funded places in higher education institutes, but it has set a target of securing a 10% increase in entrants to higher education from under-represented areas from 1998-99 to 2003-04². A range of policy tools is dedicated to achieving this increase including the payment of Widening Access Premiums³ and plans for accelerated study, improving retention rates and articulation agreements between FECs and HEIs. Further, the four wider-access regional forums (where

¹ Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow and St Andrews.

² SHEFCE does not as yet have figures available for the whole period. However, in 2001-02 the figure was 7.6% above the base figure, indicating that significant progress has been made.

³ A premium is paid to the University for each student recruited from a low participation neighbourhood. Universities are expected to use the money to increase retention rates.

FECs and HEIs work together to widen access to higher education in both sectors) have received increased funding to support a more strategic role in widening access.

The research was undertaken in this context of continued pressure to recruit and retain students from non-traditional backgrounds. Respondents were drawn from two of the four Universities in Edinburgh; Heriot-Watt University and the University of Edinburgh. The choice of the two leading Universities in the city provides an important addition to the existing literature on non-traditional students, the majority of which is based in 'new' Universities (see Read *et al* 2003, Reay *et al* 2001, Rhodes and Nevill 2004), to the point where much less is known about the experiences of widening access students who have chosen a more prestigious route through higher education.

The case study universities provide a contrast in terms of their institutional ethos and culture, and this is reflected in differences in their student body. Edinburgh, a member of the elite Russell Group⁴, offers a wide range of courses and with a student population of over 22,000 is the largest university in Scotland. Students are drawn from across the UK with 65% coming from state schools or colleges (HESA 2004). It has high entrance requirements. In 2003 the Principal announced controversial plans to widen the intake of students by reforming the admissions procedures to take account of contextual information including family background and school attended. Heriot-Watt by contrast is small campus-based university, created in 1964, which recruits predominantly from across Scotland. It offers a more restricted range of courses focussed on science and engineering, technology and management. The entrance requirements are more modest than those at Edinburgh, and 92% of the students come from state schools or colleges (HESA 2004).

Both universities have been involved to various degrees in efforts to widen participation. Heriot-Watt has a long history of partnership work with FECs and articulation arrangements for HND students. Edinburgh, by contrast, did not grant concessions to HND students until the SHEFCE-backed articulation agreement came into force (SHEFC, 2001), and as a University whose places are oversubscribed it has not been especially pro-active towards recruiting non-traditional students. Both universities, though, fund locally-based widening access courses for mature and young students and they are keen to stress that these commitments pre-dated the invention of the term 'widening participation' and the availability of external funding.

⁴ The Russell group, formed in 1994, is an association of 19 major research-intensive Universities across the UK.

In both cases the Universities allowed the researchers to contact students in their second or third year who had entered university through two different widening access programmes. The first of these, the Lothian Equal Access Programme for Schools (LEAPS)⁵, aims to widen participation in higher education, through providing a programme of support to pupils at the 46 state schools in the Lothians who are first generation educated and whose ability to reach their academic potential may have been limited through social and economic circumstances. Students opting for the Programme receive school workshops, student tutoring and shadowing, pre-application interviews and attend a Summer school. The second programme, Scottish Widening Access Programme (SWAP), provides opportunities for adults who lack the formal entry qualifications for higher education. It guarantees a place at University for those who successfully complete the access course, involving academic programmes and study skills, run as a partnership between the FECs and the HEIs in the city (Universities Scotland, 2001).

Although the proportion of students entering higher education from these Access routes is low, the universities themselves were keen to investigate the success – or otherwise – of these cohorts. Recruiting students from the LEAPS and SWAP programmes also ensured that the experiences of both school leavers and mature students could be captured and any differences analysed in a systematic manner.

In total 37 students were contacted from the SWAP programme (14 at HW and 23 at EU). A response of 18 was achieved with the majority, 12, based at Edinburgh. A total of 48 students from the LEAPS programme were contacted and responses were received from 9 students. All but one of the LEAPS students were based at HW. A total of 27 interviews were undertaken between May and September 2003. To encourage participation all students were offered a £20 voucher but the overall response rate, at just over 30%, remained low (27/85 respondents).

The interviews were split evenly between Edinburgh (13 interviews) and Heriot-Watt (14 interviews). However further breakdown in Figure 1 shows that the cohort from Edinburgh University was predominantly female⁶ and from the SWAP course while the Heriot-Watt sample included more men and more students from the LEAPS programme (Figure 2). By

⁵ For further information, see www.leapsonline.org.

⁶ At the time of the study none of the team was a member of the University of Edinburgh and as such did not have direct access to the database of students. We do not know how many men or women were in the Edinburgh sample. Evidence from the Heriot-Watt data suggests that men are less likely to participate in the study – of 14 men who attended the SWAP programme only 4 responded.

definition the LEAPS students were all first generation educated and were from working class families. The backgrounds of the mature students were more mixed. In total six students (all women) had previous experience of higher education, but had not completed the course: either starting a family or entering routine service sector jobs. The remaining 12 SWAP students came from lower income families with no tradition of higher education. The mature men, in particular, described growing up in an environment where education was perceived as a threat to working class masculinity (see also Reay 2001) and had gone into unskilled jobs in both manufacturing and service sectors.

All of the students had all completed at least two years of study. This timing was important because they had had time to develop strategies for success, and to experience the highs and lows of student life, as their academic career progressed (see also Christie and Munro 2003). Although this paper focuses on the perceived 'fit' between students and universities, the participants were questioned more broadly about routes to higher education, benefits of the widening access courses and perceptions of the value of their degree. The next section of the paper turns to the students' perceptions of themselves as 'day students'.

The 'day student' in higher education

Although the homogeneous, stereotypical student never existed (Ozga and Shuknandan 1998), the normative 'middle class' construction of students emphasises the opportunity of leaving home (to a protected environment, and in gradual stages), meeting new friends (who might become a bedrock of friends for life) and going to new places – a formative experience that broadens horizons. As such, other choices about university and student life, including living at home, offer a potentially different orientation to higher education (and one that by implication 'misses' those other opportunities). What emerges powerfully from this study is that the participants saw themselves as 'day students' – their daily rhythm involved the spatial and temporal separation of distinctive home and University worlds. The majority saw University as a 9-5 activity, contained within the working week, rather than as an all-embracing experience which immersed them in a new student identity. As such the experiences of the widening access students in this cohort did not 'fit in' to dominant ideas about being a student and their financial and social circumstances were distinct.

The evidence from our research project confirms the discrepancies between the idealised model of student life and the reality of being a 'new student' (Leathwood and O'Connell

2003). At the time of interview all the students interviewed lived at home⁷, commuting to University on a daily basis. The LEAPS students lived with one or both parents while the mature students had more complex housing circumstances depending on whether they had partners and/or children. Finances were tight for everyone and income packages were created from varying combinations of paid work, student bursaries⁸, student loans, overdrafts and other forms of credit. Without exception the LEAPS students regarded themselves as self-supporting despite the fact that they all lived at home and, even if paying rent to parents, received support in kind (see also Holdsworth 2003). As Gavin⁹ (HW, LEAPS) put it:

I make my own dinner, do my own washing and ironing and everything. I've my own funding from my student grant and my job so I'd say I'm independent enough.

The SWAP students were less likely to describe themselves as financially independent and to acknowledge the real difference made by the (financial) support of partners or family members whether from working partners, living in accommodation owned by parents or receiving help with childcare. Circumstances were most difficult for two mature students who were also single parents because of the contradictions between the operation of the Benefits Agency and the student support system (see also Scott *et al* 2003, Horne and Hardie 2002).

What underpinned the strategies of all the students, however, was the unwillingness to leave home to go to University. Living at home gave them the opportunity to gain a degree and conferred material and social benefits (Hayton and Paczuska 2002). While all the students recognised the financial advantages of staying at home, and as such their decisions were economically rational, they also stressed the importance of living at home for maintaining existing networks. These included continued access to locally-based paid work and existing social lives, as well as the importance of providing continuity and stability for their families, particularly when children were involved. Staying at home was not regarded as a second best option, or a constrained choice, as is often presumed in policy debates, even when there is a recognition of the trade-offs that have had to be made. It is important to note, however, that the students in this cohort were fortunate in having access to a wide range of universities in the city of Edinburgh. Had they lived in a more remote part of Scotland, or in proximity to a city with only one or two universities their options both of courses and of university 'status'

⁷ It should be noted that two of the LEAPS undergraduates lived in halls in first year but returned to the parental home for the subsequent years.

⁸ The Scottish Executive introduced maintenance grants of up to £1000 per annum in 2001 for students from impoverished backgrounds. Students are also eligible for travel grants.

⁹ All names and pseudonyms and any identifying details have been removed.

would have been severely curtailed. This is an important dimension of the new inequalities being created between home-based students and their more affluent peers (see also Pugsley 1998).

In the main, students had only lived at home whilst studying. Trisha (EU, LEAPS) was unusual in being one of two young students who moved into halls in first year and subsequently returned to live at home to facilitate access to her part-time job and to provide some care for her unwell parents. Living in halls caused problems because her other commitments were organised around her parental home:

I had to go home at weekends anyway because it was only half an hour away, and my work was back home, so I never really left the job that I had (whilst at school) ... and moving back gave me more time to see my family as well as working.

For the mature students, particularly those with caring responsibilities, leaving home was not an option. Debra (EU, SWAP), a lone parent, described Edinburgh University as her 'only choice' because she did not want to uproot her two primary school-aged children:

There was no possibility of moving anyway else ... taking them out of school or anything like that. [...] My family is here, I have support here, the children are at school here ... so ... I'm a lone parent so I can't go off and leave them with anybody.

The choice to live at home was thus bound up with how the students perceived their studies in relation to the wider aspects of their lives, including access to economic and social resources. Across the cohort as a whole they tended to regard studying as an extension to their existing lives rather than as a complete break from it. This sense was best captured in descriptions of being 'day students' or in likening studying to a having a '9-5 job'. Eleanor (EU, SWAP):

I'm not a typical student I suppose [...] you know our typical student day¹⁰ is like having a job [...]: get up, get everybody ready to go to school in the morning ...

Kenneth (HW, SWAP) described his very structured, work-like approach to studying:

I get up at six, shower, leave at 7.10, my girlfriend drops me off here, I get the paper, go to my first class, get picked up 5.30, home 6.30 or 6.45, have tea [...]

¹⁰ Her husband was also a student at Edinburgh University.

Although he says he ‘can do work afterwards if he wants’ he much prefers to study at University rather than at home:

Any work I’ve got to do I just sit down here (HWU) and do it now. I’ve got to get it done here rather than at home where I’ve got the telly in my way.

Being a ‘day student’ was an instrumental choice and one that meant that university was something to be fitted around existing work patterns and family responsibilities that were already embedded in their home communities. This was a common thread across all the interviews. However, further, detailed analysis of the strategies adopted by the students revealed important differences in the ways in which they juggled study, home, work and family lives, which were underpinned their perceptions of, and their orientation to, the student experience. One group, the ‘absorbed students’, were firmly committed to the normative ideal of student life despite circumstances which meant they could not achieve this fully in practice. They felt they were missing out on the pleasures of study (see Manning 2001) as well as on the wider social opportunities afforded to their more affluent peers and expressed regret at their exclusion. The second group contained ‘pragmatists’ who stressed that university was only one facet of their lives and could not be all-absorbing, whether because of work commitments or family responsibilities. They did not want or attempt to live up to the ideals of the normative student and saw being a day student as a pragmatic response to balancing the various demands on their time. The final group, ‘separate worlds’, were mature students who firmly distanced themselves from the ideal of the normative student. They actively sought complete separation between their student worlds and their home worlds, and were conscious of the inflexibilities of the university system. We now discuss these groups in more detail.

Absorbed students

Studies of middle class students show that the decision to attend University is an unspoken but clear expectation, and one that is linked to expectations about economic rewards as well as about independent living and gaining valuable personal ‘experiences’ whilst studying (see Christie *et al* 2001, Pugsley 1998). In contrast, this group of ‘absorbed students’, consisted of five students, split 2:3 LEAPS: SWAP, who had consciously decided to attend university, although it had not been an implicit or explicit familial expectation. They were attracted both by the normative ideal of student life and by the potential material benefits after graduation. For Wallace (HW, LEAPS) the decision to attend was about the opportunity:

to at least see what University had to offer and if I could cope with it and basically come out with a better opportunity for jobs and income and things

Mary (EU, SWAP) thought of University as:

truly [...] a place where you can debate ideas and challenge your assumptions and knowledge about the world. If you couldn't do that it would defeat the whole purpose of being at University. [...] We¹¹ were both brought up in Corstorphine¹², our families are here and it's nice to be able to escape from a closed and rigid way of thinking.

But while these students wanted to be wholly absorbed by University life in the way suggested in the normative model, they held a constrained view of what this full absorption would be like not least because they were all 'day students' and had either family responsibilities or work commitments. Rather than thinking about university life as a passport to a rich variety of opportunities – living in a new place, taking up sports and hobbies and then moving city to enter the graduate labour market – their priority was to free up more time to simply be at University, just to study or to socialise with other students. Yusuf (HW, LEAPS), the only Asian participant, found the student environment very conducive and a welcome contrast to his experiences at home:

it's like a schemey area [...] and I really find it hard to really get on with people that stay there. There are my friends from there that go to this Uni like, they are trying to keep contact with their friends there, but I'm not ... also I've been told I've got two different accents as well, that I sort of choose my voice as well like when I'm in Edinburgh and when I go back I start speaking more slangish to everyone ... so ... I'd say most of my social life is here at Heriot Watt because all my friends are here, and we always end up doing something like playing pool after Uni so I think when I go home, I just really go to bed.

The important characteristic of this group of students was that they privileged time and relations at university over and above the other competing aspects of their lives. But this strategy was often a direct response to a crisis in their lives, either before coming to university or during their time there, which led them to rethink their approach to life/studying. Richard (HW, SWAP) 'wanted to change his life' after his younger brother died and decided to 'take the risk' of going into higher education. Carolyn (EU, SWAP), a single parent with three children, almost left university after her first two years – she hated her course, found her department 'oppressive', and was struggling to study and take care of her children. She came

¹¹ Mary and her husband.

¹² A suburb of Edinburgh.

back into third year determined to succeed. She changed course and department, and employed an au pair to pick up her children after school and do some housework. This strategy 'took the pressure off' because instead of leaving early in the afternoon to collect her children she could stay at University until 6pm. This enabled her to devote her 'whole' day to her studies which she viewed as a '9-6 job'. Not only did this allow her more time to study it also helped her to build up social networks with other students which she saw as 'absolutely important' to her survival.

Other studies have suggested the crucial importance of friendship networks to the ability of students to succeed at university (Brooks 2002), as well as to class differences in awareness of the 'need' to make friends and socialise (Holdsworth 2003), and a notable feature of the students in this 'absorbed' group was the importance they attached to fitting in to social networks at University. As such they viewed being a 'day student' as a distinct disadvantage because it was much more difficult to become embedded in university-based friendship networks. Wallace (HW, LEAPS) almost left after the 'hell' of first year when the combination of shyness and living at home made it difficult to get to know his student peers:

I didn't socialise outside of Uni with people from Uni – I kept it to school friends or work friends. There was never a meeting place for both worlds, they were always very distinct.

For him, 'university didn't start until second year' when he changed course and made a concerted effort to 'live his life in a different way', crucially building up networks of friends at Heriot Watt.

These students were positively orientated towards higher education, and had found ways to fit in to student life, but their trajectories differed in crucial ways from dominant discourses about student culture. Although they were 'free' to attend university and socialise during the day, and like their middle class counterparts had become aware of the importance of social networks, their evenings and weekends were constrained by travel arrangements, family responsibilities and paid employment. When possible, this group prioritised going out with their university, rather than home-based, friends, but for 3/5 students this was limited to special occasions such as a 'night out' at the end of term. They could not take part in wider University-based activities, including clubs and societies which met in the evenings. Looking forward to life after graduation, only two of the five students in this group were thinking

¹⁴ One mature student, Amy, had a 22 year old daughter.

about leaving home to find employment. Again this suggests narrower ambitions than implied in the normative view that associates geographical mobility with student life.

The ‘pragmatists’: combining work and study

The second group identified was also the largest; 12 students split 5:7 SWAP:LEAPS. They had a more distant relationship with the university and their university peers. Although they saw being a student as the most important facet of their lives, around which other commitments had to fit, they did not wish university to become an all-embracing experience. They did not want or expect radical change in their existing working and social lives by becoming students. None of them had dependent children¹⁴, and for this group the main concern was how to fit together work and studies, whilst maintaining good relations with their families. Their motivation to attend university was primarily instrumental and centred on enhancing their potential employability rather than on developing a new student identity.

Inevitably, as other studies have shown, students experience real difficulties in balancing paid work and study especially around pressure points like examinations (Christie *et al* 2002). Certainly for this cohort, employment was essential to making ends meet and thus remaining at University (DETR 2000, Furlong and Forsyth 2000). Only one student in this group, a SWAP student, did not work during term time, being supported by his partner. The rest saw term-time working as inevitable. For them, living at home reduced the risks of going into higher education because they could continue in the jobs they were already doing. In sympathy with the findings of Leathwood (2001), they regarded themselves as ‘independent learners’ who were responsible for managing their own combinations of work and study. Matt (HW, LEAPS) stressed how working gave him independence from his parents, but also how it created an important difference between him and his more affluent peers:

...they [affluent students] say they do [understand my situation], but I don’t think they understand the real bit behind it [...]. I actually earn my money and it’s like going out at the weekend and that and it’s like “that’s like my whole week’s wages”. Or like, if you’re not having a good time, that’s when you think about it. You’re like “I’m not having a good time, and I’ve just spent like half my wages tonight and this is like rubbish”.

The importance of earned income meant that juggling work and study was a constant pressure for these students. A common pattern was to establish a routine by allocating blocks of time for different activities over the course of the week. Some students, like John (HW, LEAPS), tried to get all their university work done during the weekdays and then work at weekends. As Jenny (HW, LEAPS) noted, this strategy works with a ‘full timetable’ – a

particular issue for the science-based students whose days are filled by lab classes as well as lectures.

Other students fitted working around academic work on a daily basis. Heather (HW, LEAPS), who had a sports scholarship at Heriot-Watt, combined sporting commitments with studying and working part-time. She described her days as being 'very organised and [everything] has a slot'. Matt (HW, LEAPS), cited above, saw benefits in having clearly delineated times for worked:

because I'm working, you know when you've got to study, you know when you've got to ... work, rest and play ... you know, it's all set out.

But, more commonly, students spoke of the stresses and strains of their continued juggling. In principle they all agreed that studying came first, and work second, and indeed many commented that they had flexible and supportive bosses who were prepared to give them time off when the demands of University were highest (see also Canny 2002). In practice, however, the conflicts between their working lives and their university lives were evident in comments about being 'tired', having 'no time' and brothers or sisters who had been to University urging them to 'stop work'. Trisha (EU, LEAPS) worked in a hotel on Saturdays and Sundays but would work 'five to seven days a week, whilst also going to university' if someone was on holiday or if she needed the money. The adverse knock-on effects of also working at night were tangible:

It was like till 12 o'clock at night, and then you'd get up early in the morning and do Uni again, and then as soon as you were finished you'd go home, start work, and then you were in 'til 12 again, so ... there's not much time for you, your social life, or anything else. The only benefit was that it gave you the money

Students managed the demands of working and studying by cutting down on their social lives and distancing themselves from extra curricular activities – there is no sense here of student life as one of leisure and hedonistic consumption (Chatterton 2000). Although Vicky's (EU, SWAP) work schedule would have allowed her 'to go out for a little while in the evening with University friends' she rarely did so because her priority was to see her partner:

Because if you've got classes in the morning, and then you're working all afternoon, and you've maybe got an essay or an assignment to do, so you're coming home, especially if like my situation you're living with your partner [...] so, you want to try and get some time, like sit and have dinner together, and then I'll go away and study [...] so you do miss out a little bit.

A notable feature of this group then was that their collective identity as students was bound up with their studies, with the 9-5 day of the teaching university, and not with the broader social activities that are normally expected to be part and parcel of university life. They were happy to have coffee or lunch with other students during the daytime but did not expect these friendships to spill over to the other aspects of their lives: 'real' friendships were based at home. Susan (EU, SWAP) was not unusual in commenting that:

I made friends at university but maybe not that many that I'll keep in touch with afterwards. [...] [W]hat I liked about it was that although I didn't make lots of close friendships but on a very light amicable level I had a lot of friends.

Limiting their social lives in this way also revealed a great deal about the terms on which the 'new students' were either willing or able to 'fit in' to University life. Rather than seeing university as a life-changing experience, they saw it as an extension to their existing locally-based worlds. The extras – socialising, clubs, societies and so on – were something that they could take or leave depending on other constraints on their time. Although they recognised the economic benefits of being at University, they did not see it as a formative social period or a passport to geographical mobility out of their local communities. Trisha (EU LEAPS) was clear that she had missed out on the social side of University but she commented that:

you don't feel like you're missing anything because you've got your friends that you've been friends with for years, and you know they're going to be there once you're finished Uni [...] when everyone else has gone away back home.

Despite their rather stoical and pragmatic presentation of the choices that they have made, it is possible to discern in their accounts a certain acceptance of lost opportunities and pleasures of student life. Their accounts also reflect the really hard work that goes in to maintaining home, work and university life. By contrast the next group of students was not interested at all in student life.

Separate Worlds

This group consisted of 10 students, split 7 women: 3 men (and 8:2 Edinburgh: Heriot Watt), who were all drawn from the SWAP programme. All 7 of the women had school-aged children; the men in the study did not reveal any family responsibilities. What united this group was the fact that they prioritised their outside roles and responsibilities, and kept their student lives completely separate from their home lives, often with deleterious consequences for their experiences of university. What divided the group however was gender: women's role as mothers limited their access both to the academic structure of the Universities and to

the social side of student life, to the extent that aspiring to the normative ideal of student life was not on their agenda. In contrast, the men's evident displacement was manifest in their strong rejection of the normative model of student life and their consequent marginalisation within the university. Like the new groups of students identified by Macrae *et al* (1997) all of the members of this group were 'in but not of the University' (see also Tett 2000).

The motivations of this group to attend university were both instrumental and experiential. Although size of the group was small, analysis suggested that women were more likely than the men to emphasise the importance of studying for personal development (made possible when they gained some independence from children's demands) (see also Webb *et al* 1994). The men stressed both the employment potential of their degrees and the personal satisfaction of studying. Paul (HW, SWAP) for example, was proud to be 'the first person in my family that will hopefully get a degree or even get to university'. Their moves into study were triggered by poor experiences in the labour market, involving a range of dead-end jobs with no prospect for improvement. Looking to the future, though, both the women and men presumed they would look for employment in and around the Edinburgh area.

More importantly, gender affected the ways in which a separation between home and University was maintained. For women the main issue was family commitments. None of them used formal childcare and effectively their student worlds were confined to school hours and to squeezing studying into any time they could free up from other responsibilities. As such student life could not be all-embracing; it had to fit around the daily rhythms of childcare. Being a student involved the women in complex juggling acts and in making enormous personal sacrifices. Jane (EU, SWAP) described how she was continually trying to fit studying round the needs of her family:

We¹⁵ don't go out together – we used to go to the theatre a lot – we don't even consider it. I'm a member of my son's swimming club and I should take time out and go and have a swim but instead I take my [University] books when I'm waiting for him ... I usually fall asleep.

She went on to note that in retrospect she wished she had taken some time out for herself, for 'fitness time' or 'me time', because she often was too tired to make progress with her studies.

The women in this group perceived the university system as absolutely inflexible and alienating, because they perceived their juggling of complex needs to be completely invisible to the university bureaucracy (see also Watt and Paterson 2000). A particular tension centred

¹⁵ Jane and her husband.

on the need to attend afternoon classes versus collecting their children from school. Eleanor was fairly typical in describing herself as ‘lucky’ because the majority of her courses were scheduled within school time. For Catriona (EU, SWAP) a typical day at university had to end early:

I get up and get the little one ready for school, take her to school, then I’d be heading off, that depends on what time the lectures are, trying to get in on time for that. I was quite lucky – most of the lectures tended to fit in quite well with the school times. [...] The general rule is that I get [daughter] so I have to get back home [about 10 miles away] for 2.30.

They saw care of the children as their responsibility. Partners or other family members would help out only as an exception rather than the norm. In this way their position as students was clearly regulated by their moral boundaries of care (Tronto 1993): help could be asked for only when lectures times clashed or when deadlines were pressing, and not for routine study. It was notable that all of the women were doing courses in the Arts/Social Sciences which involved limited formal contact time and where the emphasis was on independent study. Combining caring responsibilities with lab-based courses with full timetables would not have been a possibility for them. In common with the mothers interviewed by Bolam and Dodgson (2002) they felt guilty about not spending enough time with their family and about not making a financial contribution to the household income.

For the men, the desire for a complete separation between home and University was driven by negative perceptions of the normative student and their poor experience of the learning environment. While their financial circumstances were similar to those described in the pragmatists’ category – they all had term time jobs – they were distinguished from them in that they continually stressed their distance from their peers and the university. For Paul (HW, SWAP) the issue was his unease about the:

whole academic environment, this whole academia thing, is just a big screen – you think people are quite well-educated, but they’re just so ignorant to so many other things, and some of them it’s like they’ve just got tunnel vision’. [...] I think it will be one of the greater mistakes of my life. I think it’s probably my own arrogance that’s brought me through and said ‘I can do this, I can do it’. If I had given up two years ago, I’d have been a lot better off mentally and financially.

The key way to contain this unease was to create separate identities in separate spheres. Pete (EU, SWAP) characterised as ‘sad’ those mature students who let university take over their

lives, while Tom (EU, SWAP) felt he had ‘no need’ to develop a new social structure at University because he already had his own social world based on ‘his partner and other avenues’.

The prioritisation of outside lives and roles meant that all ten members of this group had very limited social lives at university. This had two knock on effects. First, getting involved in activities provided by the university such as clubs and societies was not wanted or possible. Laura commented:

that never really was an option for me, because of time constraints really. I was always rushing off, rushing to get back for certain times, so anything that was out of hours was never really an option.

But secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the students’ very limited engagement with the University environment meant that they were excluded from the social networks through which informal – but important information – circulated about academic work and courses, and support services and structures. Given that ‘lack of preparedness for study’ is often cited as a particular problem for non-traditional students this exclusion from informal networks may act as a self-fulfilling prophecy in limiting the effective ability of the students to learn how the university system works. As such university was an individualised experience. Jane (EU, SWAP) commented that it was:

... very tiring. I think perhaps the fact that you’re on your own is something ... I think you are on your own a lot of the time (in sense of being left to your own devices) [...] you get more information if you are living in student accommodation or whatever, or you are going to the pub.

These students felt they had to be proactive to receive any support, from staff or students, precisely because they were outside of these informal information loops.

While problems with accessing information partly stemmed from the restricted time spent at university, these students also believed their ‘difference’ was not recognised. Catriona (EU, SWAP) felt that University was:

geared for the majority, for the single young person, I think that’s who it’s set up for and the people on the fringes we just work our way round it.

Catriona's contact with the staff had been positive¹⁷ but this was not the universal experience. In total six of these students were bitter about their poor experiences of their course, and of the teaching and support structures, which led them to characterise their institution as 'uncaring'. A general feeling was that the universities could do much more to support the needs of mature students. Echoing the work of Farwell (2002) they felt that the higher education system was persistent in reproducing traditional academic patterns, failing to open up the system to 'new' learners like them. Debra (EU, SWAP) thought that the University did not operate a level playing field with respect to different types of student:

getting in there is not equal and I still think in terms of keeping things fair and treating everyone the same, I still think there's a hell of a lot more the university can do for mature students or single parents.

She went on to detail many (small) practical measures: flexible class times and deadlines, changing rules about borrowing library books, introducing more widespread use of technology to videotape lectures and so on, which would make a big difference to the inclusion of mature students, especially those with children. Other studies have confirmed that negative perceptions of the university staff and the teaching environment more broadly are harmful to a students' chances of success (Dinsdale 2002, Lowe and Cook 2003, Knight and Trowler 2000), and it was certainly the case that these students had struggled against the odds to succeed.

The new students in Higher Education

The learning careers of all the students in this study were underpinned by one major feature: their resistance to 'stereotypical' and 'old-fashioned' ideas about what it means to be an undergraduate and their desire to show that they could make it through university on their own terms. Underpinning this resistance were two associated ideas: financial independence as a more authentic and rewarding pathway through higher education; and the need for educational/lifestyle discourses to capture more adequately the reality of the experiences of the new students. While the much larger study of Read *et al* (2003) indicates that non-traditional students perceive themselves as the 'other' within the higher education system (see also Reay 2001), our evidence suggests that widening access students castigate their more affluent peers for being the ones with the inauthentic experience of higher education. These points are considered in turn.

¹⁷ She did also comment however that the staff tended to 'be a too esoteric [...] they're working on a different level to you'.

First, as indicated earlier, the students all saw themselves as ‘financially independent’ even if they did receive support in cash or in kind from their families. The important point however was that they were at pains to distance themselves from what they saw as rather negative characteristics of the more affluent ‘Mummy and Daddy students’ (Wallace, HW, LEAPS); that is students who received enough money from parents to pay for accommodation and living costs and who did not have to work during term time to finance their studies. Although Heriot-Watt was perceived as a more democratic space than Edinburgh, Wallace (HW, LEAPS) thought:

there are some people at HW who do think they are a bit above other people. Like if you say that you are from somewhere, and you have to work, and that Mummy and Daddy don’t pay for it, there are some people who are like ‘oh right, I don’t know how you can live’. They don’t understand that you don’t have to rely on Mummy and Daddy.

At Edinburgh University the students commented on the apparent dominance of very affluent students – of ‘the very high number of wealthy people’ (Eleanor, EU, SWAP), of the ‘big divides’ (Amy, Laura EU, SWAP) which:

do take you back a bit when you first see them. It’s all very very typical stereotypes of people that are going to Edinburgh University and they’re all standing outside the library with their Marlboro light and their big duffle coats on ... and you know, the sort of plummy [accent] – well, it’s all stereotyping – it doesn’t mean that they [...] come from well-off backgrounds but they certainly appear to (Pat, EU, SWAP).

The widening access students were censorious about the conduct of their more affluent peers. Matt (HW, LEAPS) for example condemned the fully-supported students for a lack of commitment:

they’re the ones who’re always out the whole time and they don’t seem to care as much [...] you never like see them with a book, or like revising or anything like that ... whereas like for the people that are working, you have to ... you have to study now, you can’t put off the studying till later, you just have to do it.

The LEAPS students in particular thought that their non-working peers ought to be getting the highest grades in the class and expressed resentment at this in-built academic advantage. Across the sample as a whole the students did not think it unfair that they had to work to support themselves whilst at University. What they did regard as unfair, however, were the advantages conferred on non-working students. Carolyn (EU, SWAP) put it thus:

The ones that don’t have to work, that are being subsidised fully by their parents [...] have such an easy time – well not easy that’s not fair, but they don’t have

the same pressures, they don't have to go to earn their money, some of them choose to do little jobs. They are the ones that have old-fashioned ideas about students from the '70s, about being fully funded. They're the ones that have the better deal because they can just be students, they don't have to be anything else.

Secondly, lifestyle discourses associated with the image of fully-funded students, based on socialising and drinking, also made access students uncomfortable and marginalised their experiences of higher education. This was not just because participation in these activities was difficult, or even something they aspired to, but because the image of the typical student was such a long way from the reality of their lives. The mature students in particular were 'shocked and quite angry' (Debra, EU, SWAP) about the institutional promotion of a drinking culture within the Universities and felt that this gave a 'false impression' (Pete, EU, SWAP) of student life. The lack of activities for mature students in Freshers' Week added to concerns about their invisibility, and fuelled the sense that Edinburgh University, in particular, was not an inclusive environment. As Pat (EU, SWAP) pointed out this was as much a problem of the culture of the University it was of the student population:

I think if they [affluent students] thought about it, they could understand. [...] To be honest, I think it's the organisation as a whole that should be making themselves think about it. [...] I wouldn't be at University just now if it hadn't been for the Access course [...]. And, you know, without trying to brag, I think I'm a good student, and hopefully I'll be a good teacher, and I'm just a dot among thousands and thousands of people who just wouldn't have been at University if there's not different means of getting in. You know, it's just not fair at all, [...] and of course in Scotland the government's really pushing that inclusion. And they've got to make so many more inroads into making it happen or a realistic term to use as far as education is concerned because it's just simply not [inclusive].

Clearly the students did not want to 'fit in' to university on terms that they felt did not reflect the reality of their experiences of higher education. Rather they forged for themselves new ways of being a student which they wanted their peers and their institution to both recognise and value, and which they regarded as much more authentic than the experiences of their more affluent peers.

Conclusions

This paper presents a relatively small study of non-traditional students who came to university through widening access programmes. They are an important group, though, because all are succeeding in an 'older' and prestigious university environment. As such, they are precisely the students needed if the Government's vision of a more open and egalitarian higher education sector is to be achieved, and the consequent benefits for social justice are to be

realised. In the past, the difficulty of such students in succeeding at university has largely been ascribed to the students themselves – that they fail to ‘fit in’ to the university environment, and do not access the support or develop the competencies needed for social and academic success. What this study shows is a much more complex picture of the relationship between these students and their universities – where the definition of what it means to be a student and the desirability of becoming immersed in the university environment is consciously considered and weighed up (see also Ball *et al* 2002). In many instances there is a conscious rejection of the assumed norms of a middle class student life and a clear sense that they should have a right to establish a different way of being a student in the 21st century – and that the institution should provide more support for them to do this.

One particular lens through which the disadvantage faced by these ‘non traditional’ students has been viewed is that their limited financial resources means that they are much more likely to have to live at home. Of course, this is not a random sample of home-based students, and there exist strong regional (and faith based) cultures throughout the UK whereby (young) students live at home and attend a local university, perhaps before moving into independent accommodation in later years. And Edinburgh presents an advantaged location for home-based students because of the richness of local higher education opportunities. For the respondents in this study however, living at home was perceived as the only feasible choice. On the one hand it provided the only financially manageable way of pursuing a university degree, but at the same time it can be seen as immediately creating a distance between the students and life at university; fostering a situation where they continue to ‘look backwards’ to their home, rather than outwards to the new opportunities at university and beyond.

The students in this study did not tend to present living at home as a disadvantage to be overcome – instead they highlighted the functionality of living at home in terms of reducing the cost of living, while often maintaining their place in a local labour market (see also DETR 2000) and within valued local social networks. Only a minority, what has been termed the ‘absorbed’ students in this analysis, shifted their social ‘centre of gravity’ towards the university and prioritised activities and friends located there. For the great majority of the students in this sample, and certainly all the mature students, there is a strong sense that although they are very committed to their academic endeavours, their social life remains rooted at home and in their families. Perhaps this is not surprising, particularly where students are parents and therefore have to continue to care for children while studying. The key question then becomes whether it matters.

Despite the pragmatic way in which these students presented their choices, there are clear indications that they create important consequences that will sustain a systematic (largely class-based) disadvantage between them and their more affluent peers. The attainment of a degree is the most important tangible achievement from participating in higher education, but success is more difficult for these widening access students. The pressures on their lives, and particularly the strong demands either of care responsibilities or work, mean that students have to juggle academic work within a tightly constrained timetable. While many demonstrated considerable skills in time management, this must suggest that they will be under particular pressure when academic pressures peak. The small margins for manoeuvre within complex competing time (and/or budgetary) demands for many must also make them vulnerable to disadvantage should some part of the jigsaw fracture – if a child becomes sick, or if employers demand more (or less) work. The fact that they remain rather ‘semi detached’ from the academic institution, clearly also disadvantages them in relation to accessing the more informal, peer-generated knowledge, about how things work and can be made to work more advantageously. The fact that this lack was felt so acutely has particular force given that the students’ access programmes had been explicitly geared to helping them prepare for the university environment. This raises a related question about how much more difficult their transitions would have been had they not participated in the Access courses, which were widely commended by the students interviewed here as having provided them with a substantial head start in understanding the demands and systems they would meet within the university.

The attainment of a degree, though, is perhaps only a part of what employers are looking for in potential employees, where the notion of a ‘well-rounded’ graduate is still what (the most elite) employers are looking for (Pitcher and Purcell 1998), and where structural differences amongst universities are mirrored in the graduate labour market (Brown and Scase 1993). Large-scale survey data shows that graduates from lower socio-economic backgrounds receive lower average salaries than graduates from more advantaged backgrounds (HEFCE 2002). Further, working during term-time has a negative relationship to employment outcomes; particularly as compared to involvement in more valued extra-curricular activities, which these access students had much more limited opportunities to pursue. And ultimately potential future rewards from employment will be constrained to the extent that these students generally foresee themselves staying within the locality – albeit one that offers a reasonably wide range of economic opportunities.

However, perhaps this is to present too negative a picture from the perspective of the widening access students. They did not see as possible or often desirable, the adoption of the

classic student lifestyle. They instead could present themselves as a rather different type of student whose route through university was valid, and which should therefore receive more recognition and support from the institution. In some part this could be seen as a function of maturity – unlike a ‘typical’ 18 year old fresher they did not perceive themselves as being in transition to full ‘grown up’ independence. This was also true of younger working class students for whom financial independence from parents was an important attainment to value and cherish (Gillies *et al* 2001). It also promoted a deliberate sense of distance from what was seen as irresponsible student behaviour, both in terms of lifestyle choices and in relation to a low commitment to studying. From this starting point, choices about working and involvement in university life are not made in relation to becoming more like the middle class norm, but in relation to maintaining a different sort of identity – but still one in which academic success will open doors to a more lucrative and satisfying working life. While these choices have implications for the ‘fit’ between student and university, they also suggest the need to rethink the literature on transitions to adulthood to incorporate rather more diverse routes through, and attitudes towards, higher education (Furlong and Forsyth 2000, Jones 2002).

At the same time, though, the students identified clear ways in which they felt that the institutions had not recognised the emergence of the ‘day’ student, and felt their needs remained invisible. A strong sense of success being attained in spite of the institution, rather than being buoyed by its support emerges through accounts of inflexibilities in approaches to the teaching and learning environment and more intangible descriptions of the whole institution, and at least some of the staff within it, as being remote and out of touch. This research raises interesting and potentially fundamental questions about the extent to which higher education institutions can really be expected to deliver the equal playing field required to promote social justice, for students of all backgrounds, and with the broadest range of early and systemic disadvantage, within the present policy framework. It does, however, suggest that HEIs can do better than they do at present.

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Figures

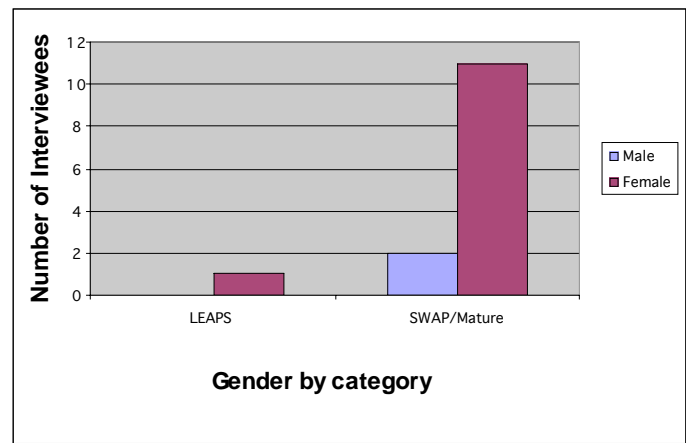


Figure 1: University of Edinburgh Interviewees

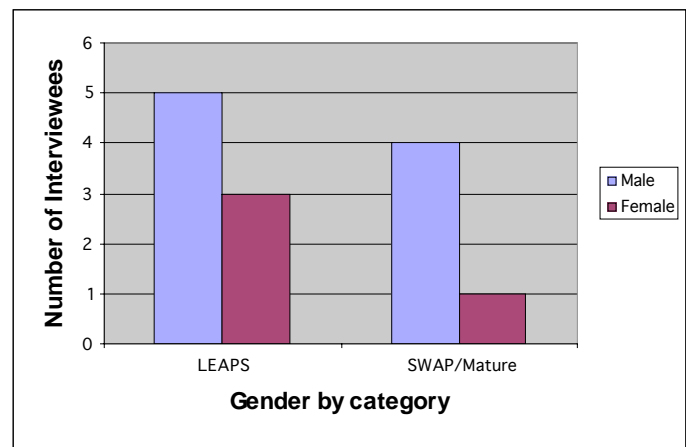


Figure 2: Heriot-Watt University Interviewees

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